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AUTHOR Eckard, Pamela J.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine if there are developmental tasks unique to the older female student returning to undergraduate school. These students are attempting to meet obligations to family, society, and self, while engaging in educational pursuits often experienced by others before assuming family or income-producing obligations; therefore they exhibit a unique set of concerns necessitating learnings within a short period of time in order to succeed. A secondary purpose in the study was to attempt to stratify the identified concerns and to describe necessary foundational and merger learnings. Questionnaires were administered to 172 junior and senior college female students ranging in age from 23 to 54 years. Responses were tabulated regarding their concerns about school in general, about professors, about peers, and about family or home. These concerns were then translated into developmental tasks, and it is shown that the majority of women 23 years of age and older must acquire psychological postures of goal-orientation, independence, and objectivity after their arrival on the university campus. The degree to which they achieve these developmental tasks will strongly influence success or failure in the university community. (LBH)

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DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS OF OLDER FEMALE STUDENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION

Pamela J. Eckard
College of Multidisciplinary Studies
The University of Texas at San Antonio

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SIG/ Research on Women in Education
American Educational Research Association

New York City, NY
April 5, 1977

"Most of my friends couldn't understand why I wanted to go to college. I never did come up with a very good explanation."

37, BLACK, Freshman

"I have discovered that things in my life that were important last year aren't exactly that important today."

32, ANGLO, Junior

"It is becoming apparent that some action must be taken to rectify the home situation. My family seemed supportive of my efforts to attend school (at first). . . Now they have become tired of carrying my former responsibilities. They complain that I study too much, that I have become grouchy and unreasonable, and that they are tired of my being away from home."

31, MEXICAN-AMERICAN, Junior

A population of female students who differ from their predecessors of five years ago in age, family status, social role and life expectations are increasingly seeking college undergraduate education. Women who completed one or two years of undergraduate school some years earlier are returning to complete their bachelor's degrees. A second group of older female students includes women of a similar status, but who are enrolled in college for the first time. These older female students returning to, or beginning, academic pursuits confront a complexly integrated set of emotional, social and personal challenges as well as intellectual demands. Conceivably, the demands made upon this group of students could prevent success in their academic pursuits, since for the most part they are making their second attempt at college work in addition to continuing to be support systems to their children, husbands and general household. For some university studies must be coordinated with part-time work as well as with family responsibilities.

Statement of Problem

A woman, 23 years of age and older, returning to college or attending college for the first time encounters experiences and demands that are not typical of those made on the typical adult female of similar age. In order to succeed in the academic environment the older female student must acquire or revitalize social, academic and organizational skills and integrate them with traditional female adult behaviors and social expectations. Often

she finds that these adaptations must be effected alongside continued family responsibilities and must be carried out initially without the necessary support system of family or friends.

As a student the older female is involved in social and intellectual interactions not perceived as typical of her nor of her age group; therefore, she expresses a different set of concerns. Since family and household responsibilities affect her differently than they do younger, single students of similar academic classification, she must identify organizational patterns which will allow her to maximize performance at school and at home. The older female student spends less time with former friends and is involved increasingly in working with peers whose ages and goal orientations are dissimilar to those of the former peers. Persons whom she once counted upon as a support system discourage her from going to school and question her as to why she is choosing to go to school.

Women over 23 years of age who have not attended school for an extended period of time find that their general academic skills are--at the least--rusty. Further, the older female student finds that many of the professors standing in front of the classes are similar in age or younger than she, and that an increasing number of those professors are female.

The older female student who attends undergraduate school expresses concern about and needs direction in coping successfully with the many interacting variables in her life. The university's awareness of pertinent developmental tasks which must be completed

or achieved by the older female student can be a basis for providing experiences in the academic community which will promote the chances that this student will succeed and therefore, contribute to herself, to those to whom she has made commitments and to society at large.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine if there are developmental tasks unique to the older female student returning to undergraduate school. These students are attempting to meet obligations to family, society and self, while engaging in educational pursuits often experienced by others before assuming family or income-producing obligations; therefore they exhibit a unique set of concerns necessitating learnings within a short period of time in order to succeed. A secondary purpose in the study was to attempt to stratify the identified concerns and to describe necessary foundational and merger learnings.

Assumptions

1. Developmental tasks unique to older female students returning to undergraduate school exist due to the conjunction of student, family and social roles.
2. Developmental tasks can be identified by investigating and classifying the expressed concerns of a sample of older female students.
3. Foundational and merger learnings required for successful accomplishment of developmental tasks can be identified by investigating and classifying the expressed concerns of a sample.

Developmental Tasks

Havighurst (1972) defines developmental tasks as:

> A task which arises at or about a certain period in the life of the individual, successful achievement of which leads to his happiness and success with later tasks, which failure leads to unhappiness in the individual, disapproval by the society, and difficulty with later tasks (p.2).

He describes three basic kinds of developmental tasks: 1) those tasks based on physical maturation, such as learning to walk and talk; 2) those tasks imposed by society, such as learning to read and to get along within the framework of society; and 3) those tasks which support the values and goals of the individual, such as preparing for an occupation or developing a philosophy of life. The boundaries between and among the tasks are not clearly differentiated and they can and do overlap (Havighurst, 1972).

That developmental tasks are "time sensitive" is significant. There is a critical period of development when a specific task must be learned. Further, there is a "teachable moment" when the organism is ready to learn. Delaying a task beyond this time not only complicates or prevents the learning of subsequent tasks, but also interferes with the learning of the original task (Havighurst, 1972, p.7).

Havighurst reports that adulthood is a "developmental period" just as childhood and adolescence are periods. Consequently, there are identifiable developmental tasks pertinent to that stage. He describes the following as developmental stages of early adulthood:

1) selecting a mate
2) learning to live with a marriage partner
3) starting a family
4) rearing children
5) managing a home
6) getting started in an occupation
7) taking on civic responsibility
8) finding a congenial social group

He further describes the developmental tasks of middle-age adulthood (ages 45-60) as:

1) assisting teen-age children with independence
2) achieving adult social and civic responsibility
3) satisfactory performance in one's occupational career
4) developing adult leisure-time activities
5) relating to one's spouse as a person
6) accepting physiological changes of middle-age
7) adjusting to aging parents

Although Havighurst emphasizes that understanding the developmental tasks of adulthood should influence "adult education," it does not appear that Havighurst's list includes the concerns and necessary learnings of older female students involved in formal undergraduate education.

According to Hurlock (1975), expectations for adult performance are clearly defined and consequently, adults have a very precise picture with which to compare their individual performance. Hurlock states developmental tasks assist the individual in recognizing what society's expectations are at a given age and the related behaviors that are socially acceptable. Hurlock emphasizes adjustments related to occupation during early adulthood and discusses related factors affecting the home and marriage. However, she does not include discussion of adjustments involved in beginning an education for a profession nor the effect on home or marriage of continuing formal education.

Erikson, in Childhood and Society (1950, pps. 261-266), characterizes young adulthood as a time of "intimacy vs. isolation" and adulthood as a time of "generativity vs. stagnation." He proposes that acceleration or retardation can occur in each of these stages and that his proposed stages are sequentially variable with cultures or generations. However, prior to the two aforementioned stages of adulthood, Erikson discusses the stage of adolescence which he entitles "identity vs. role confusion." The author's assertion that individuals can "linger excessively" in one stage may account for the readily identifiable role confusion and identity crisis that can be seen in older female students returning to undergraduate school.

Ralston and Thomas (1972) postulate that previously established , age-correlated developmental tasks may have been altered due to the changed society. Using 300 upper-division and beginning graduate students (ages 21-24), the majority of whom were education majors, the researchers attempted to identify pertinent developmental tasks. Of the eight emerging categories, two overlapped with Havighurst's tasks of adolescence (achieving independence from parents, learning new relationships with peers) and three overlapped with Havighurst's tasks of adulthood (selecting a mate, achieving adult social and economic status and getting started in an occupation.) However, the researchers identified two new categories of:

1) school success
2) financial concern

Ralston and Thomas conclude that for the population studied, the identified tasks overlapped the developmental period of both

adolescence and adulthood accompanied by two additional tasks brought on by new expectations in a changing society.

Bernard (1975) identifies the developmental tasks of adolescence as:

1) achieving more appropriate relations with peers
2) accepting appropriate sex roles
3) using one's body effectively
4) achieving emotional independence from parents
5) gaining assurance of eventually being economically independent

In addition Hurlock (1975) has identified the following tasks relative to adolescence:

6) occupational preparation
7) citizenship preparation
8) achieving socially acceptable behavior
9) preparation for marriage and vamily
10) developing values in harmony with a realistic world view

There is evidence that adults placed in student roles exhibit some behaviors and concerns similar to those expressed by adolescents in student roles. Further, it appears that combining society's expectations and a reorganization of the order of roles for older female students may bring about new concerns and consequently, new developmental tasks.

Methodology

For this study, a systematic questionnaire was designed to collect concerns of female students 23 years old and older returning to undergraduate school (See Appendix A). Through the instrument the student was requested to focus on three time periods: 1) the beginning of fall semester, 2) the beginning of spring semester and 3) the end of spring semester. The student was asked to describe one major

adjustment or one situation that required considerable thought on her part at each of those times in relation to 1) family or home, 2) school in general and 3) professor or peer relationships.

The questionnaire was originally administered to 32 students in an undergraduate educational psychology class as an experience in self-analysis and synthesis. The responses to the original questionnaire were thorough, and specific comments verified observable behaviors which had been exhibited in the group throughout the semester.

Sample

At the end of the 1976 Spring Semester the questionnaire was administered to 84 older female students in two undergraduate teacher education courses at The University of Texas at San Antonio (Group A) and to 22 students at Ball State University (Muncie, Indiana) participating in the Women's Experimental Program (Group B). At the end of the Fall Semester, 1976, the questionnaire was administered to 66 older female students in two undergraduate courses at UTSA (Group C). The second administration of the instrument maintained the original concepts and changed the focus of time periods to: 1) the beginning of Fall Semester and the end of Fall Semester.

The subjects of the study included 172 junior and senior college female students who ranged from 23-54 years of age. Of those students 5% were Black, 20% Chicano and 75% Anglo. Approximately 75% of the students were married and approximately 25% of the students

were unmarried. Of those students who were married, the majority had two or more children. Forty-five percent of the students were classified as juniors. Eighty percent of the students sampled ranged from 23 years of age to 34 years of age. Eighty percent of the sample were considered full-time students carrying nine or more hours. (See Appendix B for comparative data.)

The life space of the women ranged from migratory experiences to being wives of professionals; consequently, the socio-economic distribution varied from lower to upper-middle class.

The majority of the subjects studied were returning to undergraduate school after having once discontinued their undergraduate education. Many of those students had taken their first two years of undergraduate work at small private schools or junior colleges and were now enrolled in public universities.

Analysis and Results

The initial step in the analysis of data was to inspect responses on each questionnaire item for categories of specific concerns. The responses described situations wherein students perceived they spent considerable cognitive and emotional energies. The inspection entailed examining all responses for the core concept expressed in each statement (i.e., transportation, university standards).

The core concept was graphically underlined on the response portion of each student's questionnaire. One list was made of all core concepts identified in the expressed concerns in all time periods. If three or more students expressed a given concern, the core concept was included

in the list. The core concepts were then grouped under the four following categories:

1) concerns about school in general;
2) concerns about professors;
3) concerns about peers; and
4) concerns about family or home.

A tabulation was made of the frequency with which specific concerns appeared in the responses. Percentages were also calculated for all responses which occurred. Separate frequencies and percentages were established for each of Groups A, B and C (See Appendix C). In addition, the concerns were examined to discover consistency of expression throughout the year and/or to detect trends in sequences of concerns expressed at subsequent time periods.

In order to effect a translation of tasks from concerns, each of the categories of concerns expressed by the older female student was first reviewed to determine if it supported adulthood developmental tasks previously identified in the aforementioned studies. Second, the categories of concerns were reviewed to determine if they supported the middle age adulthood tasks. Third, those categories of concerns which were not identified as supporting either group of adulthood tasks were examined for supporting other researchers' lists of developmental tasks for adolescence and late childhood. Tasks identified in the categories of concerns not previously identified in any study were translated into developmental tasks unique to the sample of older female students returning to undergraduate school.

The translation of concerns into developmental tasks was accomplished through gestalting all promin nt similar concerns into

inclusive statements of concern. The statements of concern were translated into developmental tasks by maintaining core concepts and placing each of the core concepts in a goal-related statement.

School in General

Respondants to the questionnaire expressed twelve prominent concerns in relation to school in general. The following core concepts were identified in those twelve concerns:

A	1)	Where to attend school
B	2)	Area of specialization to pursue
C	3)	Transportation to school
D	4)	Doubts about necessity of formal learning
E	5)	How to coordinate school with work/home/family
F	6)	Ability to hold one's own with academic peers in school situations
G	7)	Assumption of responsibility for one's own learning
H	8)	Requirements of students at a university
I	9)	Adjustments necessary to meet prescribed standards
J	10)	Lack of academic skills necessary in order to succeed
K	11)	Personal financial responsibilities interfering with degree goal
L	12)	Apprehensions about encountering ethnic prejudice

Gestalting similar core concepts into inclusive statements of concern produced the following five statements:

1) Attending college requires decision-making regarding academic alternatives which will affect one's future occupation. (A, B, C, D)

2) Attending college requires an organizational pattern that allows one to utilize time in such a way as to maximize productivity both at home and at school. (E)

3) Attending college requires assuming responsibility and initiative to meet expectations and standards prescribed by others. (F, G, H, I, J)

4) Attending college can be interfered with by pre-occupation with personal financial obligations. (K)

5) Attending college requires professorial and peer interactions with a variety of ethnic groups. (L)

Considering the above statements of concern, the following developmental tasks were identified as pertinent to the sample of older female students:

I. To make decisions about educational alternatives which will lead to desirable future job.

II. To employ organizational skills which will allow dispensation of energies to priority tasks at school and at home.

III. To independently assume responsibility and initiative for learning related to future occupations.

IV. To perceive current financial limitations as a necessary step toward future economic independence.

V. To interact positively with peers and professors who exhibit different cultural and ethnic characteristics.

Professor and Peer Related Tasks

In relation to professors in all undergraduate classes the older female students expressed nine prominent concerns from which nine core concepts were identified:

A) Age of professors
B) Personal characteristics of professors
C) Professors' attitudes toward students
D) Teaching styles of "young" professors
E) Desire to know professor on personal level
F) Hesitancy to talk to professor
G) Amount of work assigned by professors
H) Expectations held by professor for student
I) Grading system used by professors

In relation to peers, the older female students expressed six additional prominent concerns in which the following core concepts were identified:

J) Learning how to work in task-oriented groups
K) Acceptance of an older person by younger students
L) Working with older and younger students as peers
M) Leaving or excluding former friends
N) Making new friends
O) Demands made on self by peers

Gestalting similar core concepts into inclusive statements of concern produced the following six statements:

1. Attending college as an older female student requires adjustments to the age, teaching style, professorial attitudes and characteristics of young professors who are similar in age or younger than the female student. (A, B, C, D)

2. Attending college requires identifying a comfortable professor/student relationship. (E, F)

3. Attending college requires acceptance of grading systems, course assignments and professorial expectations of professors. (G, H, I)

4. Attending college requires adjustments to task-oriented rather than social-oriented groups. (J)

5. Attending college requires accepting both older and younger persons as peers. (K, L)

6. Attending college requires identification of new friends from classmates and discontinuation of former acquaintances. (M, N, O)

Considering the above statements of concern, the following developmental tasks were identified as pertinent to the sample of older female students:

I. To accept individuals similar or younger in age as authority figures. (1)

II. To realistically differentiate between social and professional relationships and expectations with authority figures. (2, 3)

III. To interact with peers in work-oriented, rather than social-oriented groups. (4)

IV. To accept both older and younger persons as peers. (5)

V. To maintain or build friendships with persons who serve as support systems. (6)

Family, Home and Self Related Tasks

In relation to home and family, the older female students expressed nine prominent concerns. These were:

A. Family and children needs less adequately met due to academic requirements

B. Making adjustments at home with relatives in order to continue both family membership and education

C. Preventing parent-oriented crisis from interfering with continuing education

D. Accomplishing household tasks

E. Scheduling problems concerning transportation, household, family and school

F. Financial problems brought on by not working full-time and by costs of college

G. Leaving home to live alone or stay at home with relatives

H. Maintain good relationship with husband and meeting academic requirements

I. Meeting self-needs and family needs simultaneously

Gestalting similar core concepts into inclusive statements of concern produced the following:

1. Attending college requires making adjustments in family relationships in order to carry out academic requirements leading to degree. (A, B, C, D)

2. Attending college requires adjusting previous transportation and household budgets. (E, F)

3. Attending college consumes portion of budget previously used for other things. (F, G)

4. Attending college requires using previously identified "self-time" for family needs. (H, I)

Considering the statements of concern regarding family and home the following developmental tasks were identified as pertinent to the sample of older female students:

I. Re-define relationships with those to whom she has made commitments to the extent that tradition based guilt and anxiety are successfully reduced. (1, 2)

II. Understanding and manipulating financial structures and concerns. (3)

III. Organizing physical, emotional and intellectual space in order to meet both her own needs and the needs of those to whom she has made commitments. (4)

Conclusion

Developmental tasks identified with the older female undergraduate sample included:

- Making decisions about educational alternatives which will lead to desirable future jobs.

This concept relates to Hurlock's developmental task of selecting and preparing for an occupation which she assigns to the adolescent male.

Second, the older female student is involved in:

- employing organizational skills which will allow dispensation of energies to priority tasks at school and at home,

- organizing physical, emotional and intellectual space in order to meet both her own needs and the needs of those to whom she has made commitments,

- independently assuming responsibility and initiative for learning related to future occupations, and

- realistically differentiating between social and professional relationships and expectations with authority figures.

These are four developmental tasks engaged in by the older female student returning to undergraduate school; they do not relate to previously identified tasks assigned to any stage of development.

Third, the older female student in undergraduate school is:

- redefining relationships with those to whom she has made commitments (i.e., husband, children parents, friends).

Of similar focus is Bernard's tasks assigned to adolescence: gaining emotional independence from parents and other adults.

Fourth, older female students are involved in the developmental tasks of:

- accepting persons of older and younger ages as peers,

- maintaining or building friendship with persons who can serve as support systems,

- interacting with peers in work-oriented groups, and

- interacting positively with peers and professors who possess different cultural and/or ethnic characteristics.

These identified tasks are possible corollaries to the task Havighurst assigned to late childhood: learning to work well in the peer group.

Finally there are two tasks similar to Havighurst's task of achieving assurance of economic independence which he assigns to

adolescent males. These are:

- understanding and manipulating financial structures and concerns, and
- perceiving current financial limitation as a necessary step toward economic independence.

This supports Ralston and Thomas's research which revealed undergraduate students to be highly concerned about financial problems.

It appears that the majority of women 23 years of age and older must acquire psychological postures of goal-orientation, independence and objectivity after their arrival on the university campus. The need to complete latent or lingering developmental tasks seems to precede perceived academic and social stability.

Perhaps older female students experienced a disruption of the developmental tasks when they became dependent on, or at least subordinate to, male figures, or because they continued tradition-oriented dependency on parents. Possibly behavior patterns were established over a period of time wherein the female student for the most part did not have to assume responsibility for financial concerns, occupational decisions, responsibility for continued learning, working relationships with peers, emotional independence, or identification of free intellectual space.

It is also conceivable that some developmental tasks are not achieved through stairstep or vertical passage but rather through spiral encounters at different stages of life. This assumption would imply that a task such as interacting with peers in work-oriented groups, would 1) require achievement during late childhood

and stabilize 2) require achievement during adolescence incorporating redefined components, then stabilize, and 3) require achievement during adulthood incorporating redefined and refined components and again stabilize.

Whether it is due to lingering, latency or spiraling, older female students in undergraduate school are involved in developmental tasks, the achievement of which will strongly influence success or failure in the university community.

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APPENDIX A

Please Circle

Female Male
Age 22 or less
23 or more

I. Think back to last fall. Describe one major adjustment or one situation that required considerable thought on your part at the beginning of the fall semester:

In relation to:

A. FAMILY OR HOME

B. SCHOOL IN GENERAL

C. PROFESSOR OR PEER RELATIONSHIPS

II. Think back to the beginning of the second semester. Describe one major adjustment or one situation that required considerable thought on your part at the beginning of spring semester:

In relation to:

A. FAMILY OR HOME

B. SCHOOL IN GENERAL

C. PROFESSOR OR PEER RELATIONSHIPS

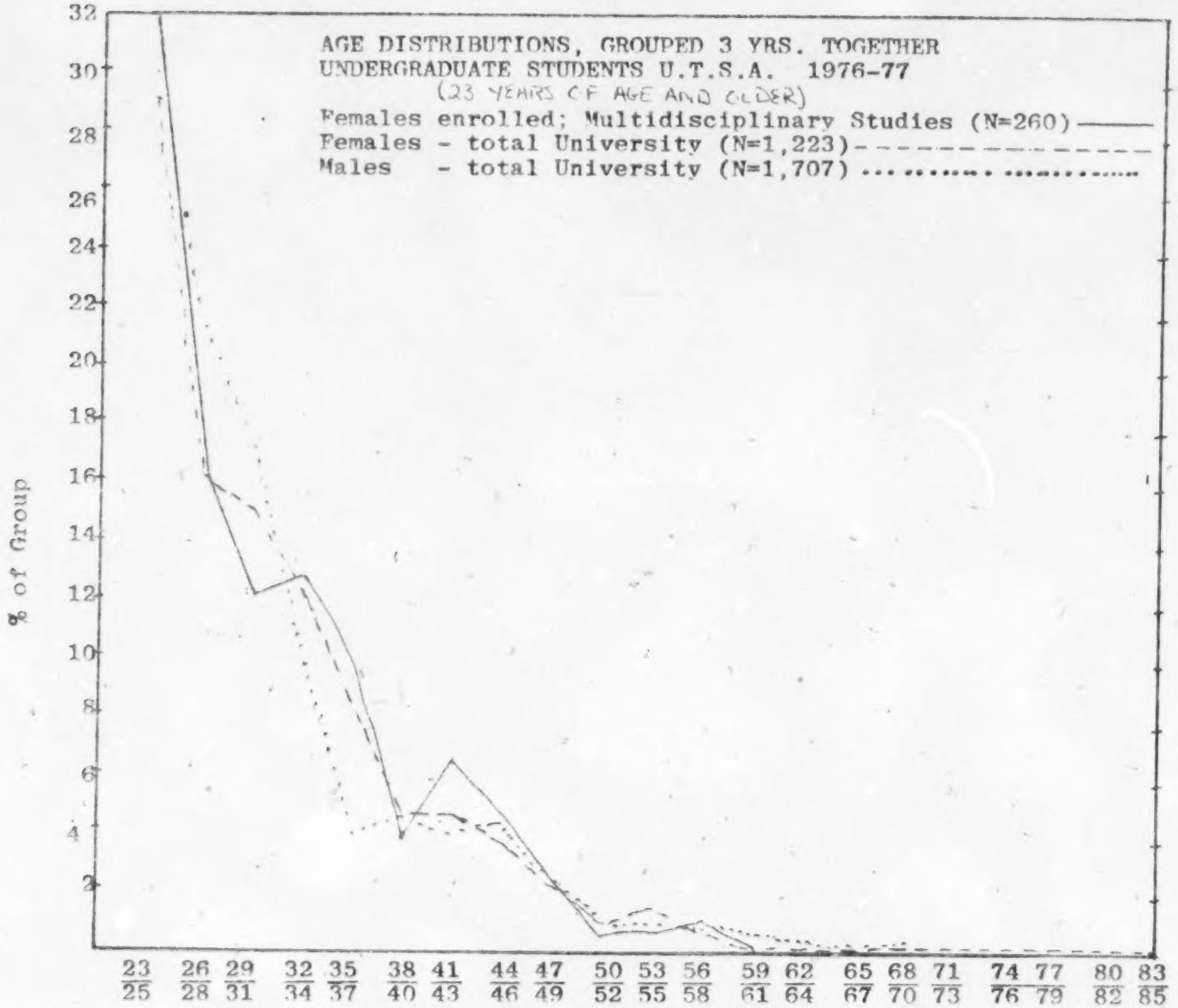
III. Where are you now? Describe one major adjustment or one situation that required considerable thought on your part during the past two weeks:

In relation to:

A. FAMILY OR HOME

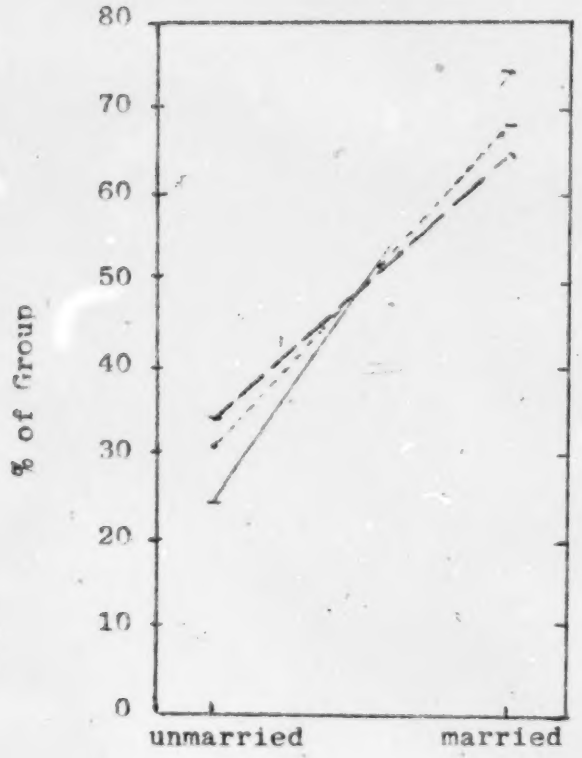
B. SCHOOL IN GENERAL

C. PROFESSOR OR PEER RELATIONSHIPS


AGE DISTRIBUTIONS, GROUPED 3 YRS. TOGETHER
UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS U.T.S.A. 1976-77
(23 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER)
Females enrolled; Multidisciplinary Studies (N=260)
Females - total University (N=1,223)
Males - total University (N=1,707)
% of Group
32
30
28
26
24
22
20
18
16
14
12
10
8
6
4
2
23/25
26/28
29/31
32/34
35/37
38/40
41/43
44/46
47/49
50/52
53/55
56/58
59/61
62/64
65/67
68/70
71/73
74/76
77/79
80/82
83/85
AGES

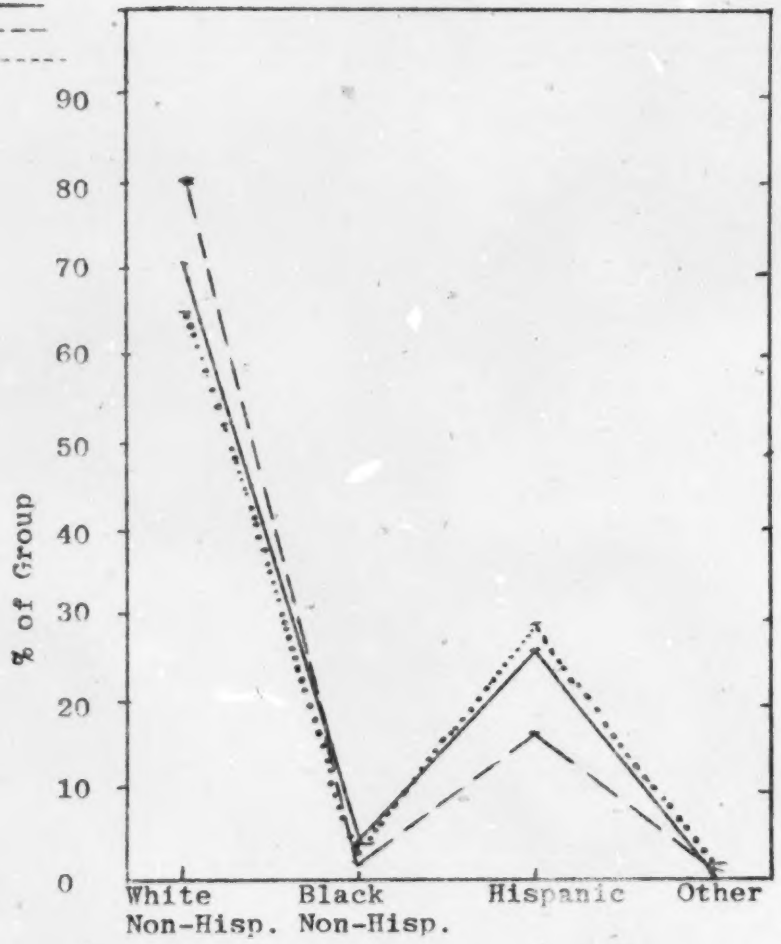
#2

DISTRIBUTION -
UNMARRIED - MARRIED
(23 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER)
Females- Multidisciplinary
Studies(260) ————————
Females- Total Univ.(1,223) - - - - -
Males- Total Univ. (1,707) .....



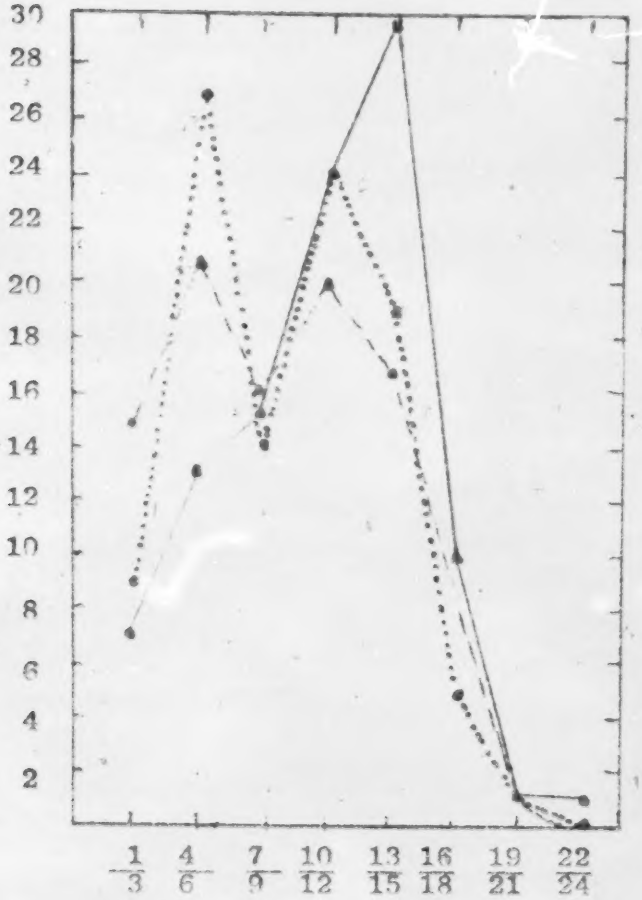
#3

DISTRIBUTION
Ethnic Origin -(23 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER)
Female- Multidis. Studies (N=260) ————————
Female- Total University (N=1,223) — — — — — —
Male- Total University (N=1,707) ----------



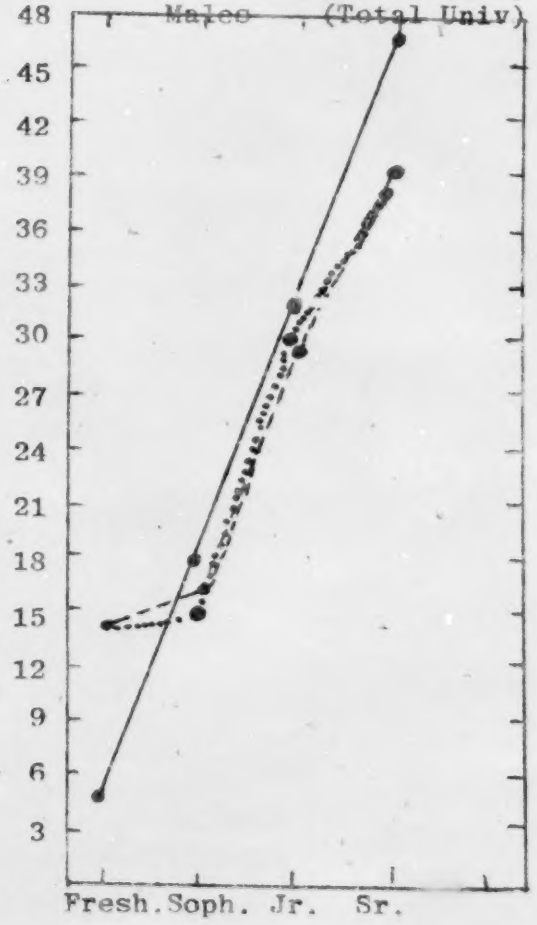
#7

Distribution of Semester Hours Enrolled
(Students 23 Years of Age and Older)
Females (MD Studies) N=250
Females (Total Univ) N=1223
Males (Total Univ) N=1707



#5

Distribution of Classification
(Student 23 Years of Age and Older)
Females (MD Studies) N=250
Females (Total Univ) N=1223
Males (Total Univ) N=1707



#6

DISTRIBUTION - PART OR FULL-TIME STUDENT
(23 YEARS OF AGE AND OLDER)

Female- Multidisc.Stud. (N=260)
Female- Total University(N=1,223)
Male- Total University (N=1,707)